

Time to speak the unspeakable

By Julian Cribb¹

“If you come to a realisation that our civilisation is crumbling in the face of climate chaos, then it opens a vast and challenging agenda. Because it affects all aspects of life.” – [Prof. Jem Bendell](#), University of Cumbria, UK

On any given day between 10,000 and 30,000 wildfires now blaze around the planet. Realms as diverse and distant as Siberia, Amazonia, Indonesia, Australia and California are aflame.

The advent of the [pyrocene](#) – ‘The Age of Fire’ – is among the bleakest warnings yet that humanity has breached boundaries we were never meant to cross and that our tenure on Planet Earth is now in jeopardy.

It is time not only to imagine the unimaginable, but to speak it: that the world economy, civilization, and maybe our very survival as a species, are on the line. And that it is past time to act.

It isn't just the fires.

It is the incessant knell of other, unnatural (i.e. human-fed) disasters – droughts, floods, vanishing rivers, lakes and glaciers, and the rise in [billion-dollar climate-fuelled weather disasters](#).

It is the spate of extinctions, the precipitous decline of sea fish, birds and corals, the disappearance of forests, mammals, frogs, bees and other insects planetwide. It is the remorseless spread of deserts and the baleful waxing of dead zones in the oceans.

It is the toxic avalanche of billions of tonnes of [human chemical emissions](#) that poison our air, our water, our food, our homes, our cities, our farms and our unborn babies, and which now kills 9 million people a year.

It is the probability that there will be [no Arctic](#) by the end of this century, and rising seas will expel 300 million from their homes.

It is the slow, ominous seepage of [methane](#) from the world's oceans, tundra, tropical peatlands and fossil fuels, threatening runaway warming of 7-10 degrees or more.

It is the insidious drift of [billions of tonnes of soil](#) from the land that feeds us, into the blind depths of the ocean, placing the world food supply on a knife-edge as [age-old methods of growing food fail](#) in the turbulent climate and droughted landscapes of the future.

It is the rising toll of [noncommunicable disease](#) that stalks affluent societies, killing three people in every four.

Nor can we avoid the fact that humanity presently invests [\\$1.8 trillion a year arming](#) itself for the real ‘war to end all wars’. Robotic weapons of mass destruction commanded by artificial intelligence will probably take the final, fateful decisions about who is to live and who to die, once unchained by political malice or blunder. These weapons are mainly controlled by men of unsound mind and national governments seething with paranoia about one another.

¹ Julian Cribb is an Australian science author. His latest book is [Food or War](#), Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Around the world there is a rising chorus, from science, youth, elders and women for urgent, immediate action in the face of inescapable threats to our society and existence. From warning issued by thousands of scientists to Extinction Rebellion and the School Strike for Climate a citizen's movement is claiming the streets of the world's cities.

[Pope Francis](#) foreshadows adding "ecological sin against the common home" to the Catholic catechism. [Bank of England governor Marc Carney](#) warns of an "abrupt financial collapse" due to climate change, as firms which ignore the issue go bankrupt. The [Global Economic Forum](#) see mounting danger in its annual assessment of risks to our common future.

Swedish student [Greta Thunberg](#) states: "For way too long, the politicians and the people in power have gotten away with not doing anything to fight the climate crisis, but we will make sure that they will not get away with it any longer. We are striking because we have done our homework and they have not."

Professor Bendell, cited at the start of this article, is one of a growing number of voices now warning that the collapse of civilization may already have begun. That we cannot easily predict its pace, trajectory or magnitude is no longer an excuse for inaction, he says. His paper [Deep Adaptation: A Map for Navigating our Climate Tragedy](#) garnered worldwide attention with its prediction that "There will be a near-term collapse in society with serious ramifications for the lives of readers".

Catastrophe is "probable," it added, and extinction "is possible."

So far only a handful of countries – France, Canada, Britain, Ireland and Argentina - [have declared even a climate emergency](#), despite surging support for such a move by thousands of cities and local jurisdictions. Most Governments continue to move at glacial pace – ignoring the other 9 existential threats that confront humanity.² The question is: why?

A worldwide counter-revolution is under way, designed to paralyse action against climate change, global environmental destruction, extinction, polluted air, water and food. It is financed by '[dark money](#)' from a terrified fossil fuels sector through shady institutions with anodyne names like the 'Competitive Enterprise Institute', the 'Heartland Institute' and the 'Institute for Public Affairs'. It invests hundreds of million dollars a year in global propaganda aimed at discrediting climate and environmental science, seducing governments and deceiving the public.

While wise individuals haul desperately on the handbrake of the human transport as it hurtles towards the abyss, the climate counter-lobby is stamping on the accelerator as hard as it can.

A [recent UN report](#) says the world's leading fossil fuel producers are planning to ramp up carbon emissions in 2030 by 50 to 120 per cent beyond the limit for a safe human future (1.5 degrees C). Despite a renewable energy boom, fossil fuel infrastructure investment worldwide has bounced back in 2019 after 3 years of decline, says the International Energy Agency. 33 international banks have ploughed [\\$1.9 trillion into fossil fuels](#) since the Paris Accord was signed.

On the face of it, the fossil fuels lobby has turned the tide, at least in the short run – and humanity is now galloping towards collapse a little faster.

² The ten existential threats to human civilization and survival are: resource depletion, extinction and eco-collapse, WMD, global heating, global poisoning, collapse of food systems, pandemic disease, uncontrollable new technologies, population growth and mass delusion. They and their solutions are described in "Surviving the 21st Century", Springer, 2017. <https://www.springer.com/gp/book/9783319412696>

There are only three motives for hazarding human civilization in such a fashion: greed, malice and ignorance. Either the rewards are so great that fossil executives are prepared to risk cooking their own grandchildren, or they are just plain blind to the risks. Since they are largely technical people, the latter does not ring true, as the archives of leading oil companies like Shell and [ExxonMobil, exposed in court](#), reveal they have known exactly what they are doing to the Planet for nearly half a century – and have not only ignored it, but worked assiduously to deceive humanity about its likely fate while they ramped up their output of carbon.

More sinister still is the growing power of the fossil fuels lobby over the world media and also over governments – not only the floundering western democracies, but also states like Russia, China, Brazil, India and Saudi Arabia. Media organisations such as the [Murdoch News Corporation](#) serve as an unofficial propaganda front for fossil fuels, brainwashing an unquestioning audience with a round-the-clock thunder of deceit, half-truths and misdirection.

The world is dividing into two opposing camps: the concerned ‘survivors’ – the young, the old, the wise, the educated, the informed and the pragmatic – and those who are willing to bet the farm on the very global system that will destroy them.

As I have written [elsewhere](#), the scientific ‘best guess’ how many human lives Collapse will cost ranges from about half of humanity to well over 90 per cent. The actual number is not knowable because human behaviour, in the form of war, cannot be foretold. However, the process begins with climate-induced famines and global water crises – both already evident at a regional level – leading to mass refugee tsunamis and multiplying conflicts. Compared with the Holocaust of World War II, (one of the worst *intentional crimes* in human history) the toll of lives taken is likely to be around 1000 times greater.

As this brutal truth sinks in, the part of humanity committed to survival is starting to seek legal redress. [Columbia Law School](#) documents over 1640 ongoing legal cases against fossil fuel companies and/or governments, both in the US and globally, and many more are starting or in contemplation. But the law alone may not be enough, as it is slow and the fossil counter-revolution has deep pockets.

It is time not only to think the unthinkable, but also to speak it.

Without urgent action to terminate fossil fuel use, return the planet to a state of ecological health and [address all 10 mega-threats in an integrated way](#), then our worst fears will become our fate. Collapse becomes inexorable. It has happened to most, if not all, empires and great civilization in the past; it is a process that humans have so far proven themselves ill-equipped to arrest.

As things stand, most experts still believe there is a narrow window to avert this fate by universal, agreed action – but it is closing rapidly. Many, like Prof. Bendell, think it is already closed, though they refrain from saying so publicly, for many reasons. They do not believe it will happen in the near-term – as do the so-called ‘catastrophists’ – but that the process, once set in motion, becomes impossible to halt as it gains momentum. The impact will fall chiefly on the second and third generations hence.

The only certainty is that doing nothing sentences humanity to Collapse - economic, societal and potentially, existential. Doing too little cannot avert disaster. It is time to discuss this, openly, honestly, truthfully, universally.

There is only one rational choice before us all: to choose to survive.

This involves taking [all necessary actions](#),³ although they spell the end of familiar systems of energy, food, water, money, defence, transport and politics - and their replacement with new ones, universally dedicated to a viable, just and sustainable human and planetary future.

³ Op cit. "Surviving the 21st Century", Springer, 2017. <https://www.springer.com/gp/book/9783319412696>